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ABSTRACT

A reward system was implemented for 1 month in a second grade classroom in an attempt to increase prosocial interactions among students. Participants were 37 children approximately 7.5 years of age who attended two classes at a rural elementary school. Children in treatment and control classrooms were given a brief lecture on good citizenship; additionally, treatment group subjects were provided a reward system designed to help them become good citizens. In the treatment condition, students were given opportunity to earn stars every time they did a kind or helpful act. Children were encouraged to report during daily circle time how they had been kind, cooperative, helpful, or had shared something with a peer. Each report had to be corroborated by at least one classmate. Prosocial behavior increased significantly among second graders in the treatment group, not only in the classroom, but also in the hallways and lunchroom. Pre- to post-treatment differences in control subjects' prosocial behavior were not found. It is concluded that if young children are to act in caring and helpful ways, they must be consistently reinforced until acting in a prosocial manner becomes habitual and self-reinforcing. (RH)

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Effects of a Brief Intervention Program to Promote Prosocial Behaviors in Young Children

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Running Head: PROSOCIAL INTERVENTION

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Abstract

A classroom procedure that did not involve extensive teacher training nor intrusion into the school system was found to be easily implemented for one month with second graders. The children were encouraged to report during daily circle time how they had been kind, cooperative, helpful or sharing with a peer. The report had to be corroborated by at least one classmate. Each prosocial action resulted in a star being placed on a class star chart. Pre- and post- observations of the frequency of prosocial actions by the intervention class and a randomly chosen control class revealed a significant increase in prosocial actions among peers in the intervention program not only in the classroom, but also in the hallways and lunchroom.

Effects of a Brief Intervention Program to Promote Prosocial Behaviors in Young Children [1]

The Problem

Promoting prosocial behaviors among children in classrooms and in families is an important objective for teachers and parents alike.

Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another person. Considerable stability from early childhood has been found for such acts, thus making more urgent the necessity for caregivers to find ways to promote prosocial actions early in children's lives (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989).

Moral development theorists suggest that cognitive development is highly implicated in children's moral and altrusitic reasoning (Bar-Tal, Sharabany, & Raviv, 1982; Blasi, 1987; Eisenberg, Lennon & Roth, 1983; Kohlberg, 1978). Concerned caregivers cannot wait for advanced intellective skills to develop before facilitating the growth of prosocial skills in children.

What adult techniques have been found to be effective in promoting prosocial behaviors? Some researchers have linked child-rearing styles with the early appearance of acts of

concern, kindness and helpfulness in toddlers, and preschoolers (Reingold, Hay & West, 1976; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow & King, 1979). Inductive parental teaching style and low use of power assertion or love withdrawal has been associated with increased child empathy and responsiveness to prosocial television content (Abelson, 1986). Adult modelling and teaching seem implicated in the promotion of altruism.

Ianotti (1985) found that the best single predictor of preschoolers' spontaneous prosocial actions was their ability to infer another's emotions. Yet teachers in that study proved poor at predicting which youngsters would be the most prosocial. Smith, Leinbach, Stewart & Blackwell (1983) reported that verbal exhortation and opportunities to practice helping, sharing and comforting behaviors significantly enhanced such actions among four and five year old children.

Increased classroom harmony through implementation of a program of positive social-problem-solving skills was achieved by Shure & Spivack (1980). Intensive, three-month daily lessons were given to increase children's ability to understand feelings of self and others and to learn how to generate alternative solutions to conflicts. Use of puppets and audiocassettes can increase classroom prosocial interactions (Dirkmeyer & Dirkmeyer, 1982). Extensive teacher training in implementing cooperative learning strategies has been suggested as a technique to enhance children's prosocial interactions (Edwards, 1986; Elardo &

Cooper, 1977).

Objectives

The goal of the present study was to explore a method that would be inexpensive, easy to implement in the classroom, require minimum teacher training for implementation and non-intrusiveness into the school system, yet would increase prosocial interactions among the children. The hypothesis tested was that initial explanation of and implementation of a reward system would be effective in enhancing the frequency of children's prosocial bids and be enjoyable for them.

Subjects

The subjects of this investigation were 37 children (21 boys and 16 girls) with a mean age of 7 years, 4 months. Subjects were all White, primarily from lower-to-middle class homes, attending a rural elementary school. Subjects were from two different second grade classes. In both classes, children were heterogeneously grouped according to ability, therefore, I.Q. and achievement were relatively constant between the two classes.

Methods

In the school where this investigation took place, there were a total of five second grade classes. Two classes were randomly selected to participate in the study. One classroom was then randomly assigned to the treatment group; the other class became the control group.

Prior to any intervention, both classroom groups were

observed for one week daily for one hour by two observers. After the month-long intervention procedure, observations were again carried out, with both groups observed for a schoolweek for one hour daily. During pre- and post-observations, a total frequency count of any and all prosocial acts was recorded for the children in each class.

Three types of prosocial behaviors were operationally defined and coded during the pre- and -post observations. These behaviors were:

Sharing: Giving away or lending something to another

Helping: Attempting to assist someone

Cooperating: Working together in a joint activity or for a common purpose

Inter-observer reliability between two independent observers (one blind to the study conditions or hypothesis) was r=.90. Observations took place in several different settings: Classroom reading groups, seat work, and quiet play (25 minutes); lunch room line-up and hall walk (5 minutes) and cafeteria eating (30 minutes). Variation in setting for the pre- and post-observations was designed to increase the probability of generalization of any effects found as a result of the classroom intervention procedures.

Treatment conditions. Children in both the intervention and control groups were given a brief lecture by an independent psychologist on "Why We Should All Be Good Citizens." An excerpt

of this speech is as follows:

> "From now on, I want everyone to be a good citizen. Whenever you can be, be kind and helpful, respect others, cooperate with your classmates and treat them nicely. Be happy and help make other children feel happy."

Later in the day, children in the intervention treatment group were reintroduced to the speaker, who set up a reward system for them. A large sheet of paper with every child's name on it was posted on a wall, along with a large number of stars. The children were told that in order to help them become good citizens, they would be given the opportunity to earn stars every time they did a kind or helpful act. Each afternoon the class met briefly in circle time and children told their classmates if they had done something nice for someone else in in the class, or if someone else had done something nice for them. In each instance, the initiator of the prosocial act received a star on the chart. Criteria for a star were that each prosocial act had to be peer-to-peer, among classmates, and verifiable by at least one other child in the class.

The speaker promised the class that if all the stars were used in four weeks, the entire class would be rewarded with a party. He provided a reminder that it did not matter which child earned the most stars as long as the <u>whole class</u> used up all the stars at the end of four weeks.

It is important to note that both teachers were instructed not to alter their normal teaching practices during the study, nor were the teachers required to learn a new set of skills in classroom management or style.

Results and Discussion

During the four weeks that a star chart was utilized in the intervention classroom, a total of 619 prosocial acts were recorded. Although no provision was made to ascertain the frequency of occurrence for each specific prosocial behavior, the observers and the teacher reported that sharing occurred with the most frequency, followed by helping and then cooperation. The teacher reported that in the first week that the Star Chart was used, children were much more likely to do nice things for the teacher than for peers. The children needed reminders to be kind to each other. She also felt that after the first week of the treatment, the children in her classroom "really got the hang of it," and couldn't wait to report their altruistic acts at the end of the day. She reported that the children really enjoyed their sharing time to tell about kindnesses done by and for them.

The teacher of the children in the control group felt that perhaps the moral preaching had an impact for one or two days, but beyond that, she felt that there was no real carryover from the lecture. In other words, the teacher did not perceive that preaching alone affected the frequency of children's prosocial actions one month later.

There was no significant difference between the Pretreatment ($\underline{M}$ = 43.5) and Posttreatment ($\underline{M}$ = 45.5) scores in the control group. However, Table 1 shows that there was a significant increase from pretest to posttest ($\underline{M}$ = 46.4 and $\underline{M}$ = 70.5]) in prosocial acts after one month of reward in the intervention class.

Insert Table 1 about here

Conclusions

This study showed a marked effect of tangible plus social rewards, and daily peer group interactions, on the frequency of prosocial behaviors among children. Children who only received a single dose of verbal exhortation to act in a prosocial manner did not show any significant increase in their prosocial acts one month later. The significance of this investigation for parents and teachers is that if we want children to "be good", that is, to act more caring and helpful with one another, we must consistently reinforce them when they are young, until acting in a prosocial manner becomes habitual and self-reinforcing. Furthermore, actions speak louder than words. If parents and teachers want children to act in prosocial ways in the classroom, they need to practice what they preach.

Exhortations to altruism were effective only when coupled with active attempts to identify, praise,and reward (by gold stars and social approval) prosocial initiatives by classmates toward one another. Further study would be needed to see whether there are lasting effects of this procedure or whether further stars and social support boosts need to be given to young children over a longer time period to ensure stable frequent prosocial interactions.

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Footnotes

1. Paper presented at the XXIV International Congress of Psychology, Sydney, Australia, August, 1988.

Table 1

Mean Frequency of Observed Prosocial Behaviors

Group	Pretreatment	Posttreatment	Value
Experimental Group	46.5	70.5	$p<.05$
Control Group	43.5	45.5	NS

$a_n = 19$

$b_n = 18$

Note Each cell value is the mean of two independent observers' ratings.